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Sunday 22 March 2026 – Lent 5

Our Service today has been prepared by Rosalie Gwilliam,
one of our Lay Preachers.

Welcome to our service this morning.

In working together on our shared mission, we commit to seven core values:

Togetherness, Humility, Curiosity, Love, Inclusiveness, Justice, Sustainability.

Inclusiveness: we recognise the full equality of the entire human family to share in ministry, leadership, and worship, regardless of race, age, physical ability, neurodiversity, marital or economic status, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

Welcome

Introduction

Some weeks feel like walking through a dry valley – hope is thin, energy is low, and the way ahead is unclear. Today, we listen for God's promise of breath, renewal and life. As we worship, we are invited to notice where we long for fresh hope and to be open to the Spirit which brings life even in the driest places.

Candle

When we arrived this morning we entered into the normal bustle of a church on a Sunday morning: friends, greeting each other, all of us bringing our energy and enthusiasm. Now that we are silently sitting together in the pews, I invite you to close your eyes ... and consider the word 'sanctuary'. A sanctuary is a sacred place set aside for sacred things. It is a place of refuge and protection. This room is a sanctuary. The season of Lent is a kind of sanctuary. There is inside you a place for sacred things, a place where God abides.

Silence

Mission Statement: Sharing God's love, creating hope, working for justice.

As we extinguish this light, we acknowledge the darkness and pain of war and oppression in the world.

A candle is extinguished

Let us pray

Loving God, we open our hearts to you. We invite you into our inmost being, only to find you already there. Strengthen us in our quiet places and then lead us into the work of justice and peace. Amen

Call to Worship

In this time of worship, we wait for you, O God.

Yes, we wait for you.

We feel out of our depth in troubles,

and we wonder if you hear our cries for mercy.

If we list what is wrong in our lives, we are overwhelmed.

So, we trust in your mercy as we come to worship.

We wait for you eagerly,

and trust in your promises.

Prayer

Holy one, breathe new life in us as we continue on this Lenten journey. Help us to follow in the way of Jesus, who brings hope and new beginnings. Amen

Hymn TIS 684: [Love Will Be Our Lenten Calling](#)

(Tune: Praise my Soul)

1. Love will be our Lenten calling'
love to shake and shatter sin,
waking every closed, cold spirit,
stirring new life deep within,
till the quickened heart remembers
what our Easter birth can mean.

as we turn for home again,
longing for the words of pardon,
stripping off old grief and pain,
till we stand, restored and joyful,
with the Church on Easter day.

2. Peace will be our Lenten living

3. Truth will be our Lenten learning:
hear the Crucified One call!
Shadowed by the Saviour's passion,
Images and idols fall,
and, in Easter's holy splendour,
God alone is all in all.

Psalm 130

From the depths of despair, O Lord, I call for your help.
Hear my cry, O Lord. Pay attention to my prayer.

**Lord, if you kept a record of our sins, who, O Lord, could ever survive?
But you offer forgiveness, that we might learn to fear you.**

I am counting on the Lord; yes, I am counting on him. I have put my hope in his word.

I long for the Lord more than sentries long for the dawn, yes, more than sentries long for the dawn.

O Israel, hope in the Lord; for with the Lord, there is unfailing love.
His redemption overflows.

He himself will redeem Israel from every kind of sin.

(Holy Bible. New Living Translation copyright 1996, 2007. Tyndale House Foundation.)

Prayer

God of the resurrection, we do not always live as Easter people. Too often, we find ourselves distracted by the rattling of dry bones. It is so easy to forget your gift of living water when we are surrounded by dust, despair, and desert.

We so often feel parched, drained of life and without hope. It is really like travelling through a dry valley without an exit.

Come free us O God!

Heal us, Jesus Christ!

Loosen the bonds that prevent us from entering new life in your Spirit.

We long for Easter.

Come, free us!

Amen

Scripture

The Spirit of God brings new life! This theme dances through today's readings. While the Sundays in Lent are not counted toward the forty days of Lent itself, most of us lean toward repentance during the Sundays of this season. Into our sense of despair comes God's promise of resurrection. Our two Bible readings today tell the most startling stories of death-turned-to-life. As an Easter people, this is life-giving news indeed!

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

(page 1349)

John 11: 1-45

(page 1668)

Reflection - Ezekiel 37: 1-14 and John 11: 1-44

There are few things as grim as the image of dry bones. In me, it invokes thoughts of death, most certainly, but also desecration. I am reminded of the devastating harm we can do to one another, our capacity to violate dignity to the end and even beyond.

In Ian Sowton's poem 'Dry Bone Valley' he speaks of the desolation of Rwanda and Darfur. *'Satan plays Lego with Rwandan skeletons, chews over the remains of hope in Darfur and a thousand other slums.'*

The dilemma is that touchstones in modern and ancient history are too numerous to recount. The horror of this image is palpable. But it doesn't end there.

Suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and then bones knit together with sinews; flesh and skin covered them, and spirit flowed into them.

They lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. 'I will put my spirit within you and you shall live, and I shall place you on your own soil.'

For the prophet Ezekiel, there is something about our God that brings life and possibility home even in the bleakest and most despairing time. There is something in the heart of our God that offers impossible hope.

In a vision God actually gives an explanation for what it's all about. 'These bones are my people' says God. They say 'Our bones are all dried up, our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' But, says the Lord, 'I am going to open your graves and bring you up, my people. I will put my spirit within you and you shall live.'

So this is about a lot more than just whether Jesus can resuscitate his mate's corpse. It's about whether the message of God has anything to say in the face of deathliness, of lost causes, of decimated hope.

There are few things as despairing as a senseless death of a young person – the unexpected death of someone deeply loved, as Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 'The someone we live for' - suddenly dies, families are shaken to their core, friends struggle for meaning.

For the Gospel writer John, there is something about Christ that brings life and possibility and freedom in the hardest, most despairing time. There is something in the heart of our God that offers impossible hope.

Neither Ezekiel nor John deny a reality of death and desolation, injustice and pain, but neither do they obscure or limit the promises of God. The message is clear: transformation is God's signature. No matter how bleak, how hard, how impossible, new life – justice, peace, dignity – can break through.

We are called to conspire with God who makes the impossible possible. To act towards that which we believe. However imperfect or impartial our efforts, each step forward in justice becomes a witness to the impossible hope.

Nothing is so dead that it is beyond the life-giving reach of Christ's Spirit. Wherever the Spirit breathes there is life. No heart is too scarred, no community is too broken, no earth is too scorched, that the Spirit cannot breathe and new life blossom forth in joyous celebration and the spirit will breathe new life here as we have the courage to loosen our grip on what has died and hear the voice of Christ calling us, 'Come out.' As we approach Easter, let us renew our commitment to the impossible hope of God.

I close with words from the Poem 'Dry Bones Valley.'

*Plant something new in us, reassemble the strewn backbones of our resolve,
breathe prophesy into us so that blade by blade, tuft by tuft, we may animate these
Lenten slopes with living green of Easter hopes.*

Hymn HFTC 226: [Breathe on Me Breath of God](#)

Offering Dedication

God of peace, it is our deep desire that people everywhere find life and peace.

Use these gifts we bring today so that life and peace come closer to those most in need. Amen.

Community Time - Celebrations, Notices, Prayer concerns

Prayer

*(To the bidding: 'Come, Spirit of Christ'
The response is: **Bring life and peace.**)*

Spirit of life and peace, we think of places across the world where there is war particularly just now in the Middle East.

silence

Come spirit of Christ

Spirit of life and peace, we bring to mind people facing sickness and disease, those we have named and those we hold in our hearts.

silence

Come Spirit of Christ

Spirit of life and peace, we remember communities recovering from natural disasters, those still impacted by the storms earlier this year, particularly those around the East Coast of Northland.

silence

Come, spirit of Christ

Spirit of life and peace, we pray for homes where there is violence and oppression and hope is hard to find.

silence

Come, Spirit of Christ

Spirit of life and peace, in silence we bring to you the people and concerns closest to our hearts this morning.

silence

Come, Spirit of Christ,
Bring life and peace. Amen

Hymn HFTC 560: [God is Here As We His People](#)

(Tune: Hyfrydol)

Holy Communion

Invitation to the Table

Jesus calls us out of the shadows, out of the dry graves, to be entirely filled with God's presence. He calls us to this table, to be nourished and bound together, as dry bones into one Body, living in Christ.

Come to this table you who are beloved in Christ.

Come, not because you must, but because you may.

Thanksgiving

The Lord be with you

And also with you

Lift up your hearts

We lift them to the Lord

It is truly good to give you thanks, O God, for you look upon our brokenness and breathe life into us. In the valley of our despair, you bring hope. When we were scattered and dead, you promised to open our graves and bring us home. Therefore, we join our voices with the living creation in this song of praise:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!

Breaking of the Bread

On the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus took bread. Having blessed it he broke the bread and gave it to his disciples saying, 'this is my body, given for you'

In the same way he took the cup of wine, gave thanks for it and said, 'this cup is the new relationship with God, sealed in my blood.'

In sharing this bread and wine, we remember the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, the One who shared his life with all, including the poor, and the oppressed; the One who lived, was crucified, and raised to new life in God.

Prayer

Now, O Lord, we ask you to send your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these gifts of bread and wine.

As you brought skin and flesh upon the bones, and breathed life into the slain, breathe your Spirit into us, that we may be made one body, and become an exceedingly great army of love and justice. Amen

All things are now ready, so let's share this bread and wine together.

Communion is Served

(You will be served the bread in your seats.

Please hold it until all are served, and we can eat together.

Likewise the cup.)

May Christ's body given for you, bring you life.

May Christ's life poured out give you hope.

Prayer

Generous God, we thank you for this meal that binds us together. May the life we have received empower us to be witnesses in the world that feels dry. Let us leave this place as a living, breathing testimony that you have done it, that you have restored us, and that we are your people. in Jesus' name. Amen

Hymn FFS 57: Song of Faith That Sings Forever

1. Song of faith that sings forever
through God's people, ages long,
Word that holds the world together
when our hearts take up the song,
always, always somewhere sounding
though the source we do not see,
counterpoint to all despairing,
it is hope that sets the key.

2. Song of faith, in exultation,
rising through the vaults of prayer,
tune of simple celebration
offered up in open air,
song in chapel and cathedral,
descant to our daily tone,
song from sick-bed or in prison:
faith must often sing alone.

3. And when life would overwhelm us,
when there seems no song to sing,
hear the constant voice of courage
out of fear and suffering:
all who've loved and trusted Jesus,
all who lift us to be strong,
endless, endless are the voices
of the faith that makes the song.

Benediction

God, the Creator, knows your heart and gives you hope.
Jesus the Christ, walks beside you to show the way,
the Spirit breathes life into you and gives you peace.
Go with the blessing of this God
We go in God's name to share life and peace; may it be so.

Sung Amen

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